

Teacher Profile: Mary Grace Orr

INTERVIEWED BY WALT OPIE

Spirit Rock: Where did you grow up? What originally drew you to meditation practice and what were some of your early influences?

Mary Grace Orr: I grew up in Connecticut, and then in Maine, in an East Coast intellectual family. They were very agnostic and believed religion was “the opiate of the masses.” For unknown reasons, I decided very early that I wanted to be Catholic, so I raised myself Catholic secretly (laughs).



I was always drawn to prayer and meditation, but in those days there weren't opportunities for lay people to learn those techniques.

The church has changed a lot since then. Ultimately, I never became a Roman Catholic; I didn't want to obey all the rules. It was in the 1950's, and I knew I wasn't going to have 11 children, for one thing! I became an Episcopalian for the next 15 years or so. I went to Oberlin and Barnard Colleges. While at the latter, I met my first husband and came to California with him in 1964. I became quite interested in Jungian psychology and joined a Jungian group. With them, I began to discover my own inner spirituality. And I became a psychotherapist. During that time I also had two daughters. That first marriage ended in 1979.

About two years after it ended, I met my second (and current) husband, Russell. Shortly after we were married, we went to Tassajara (Zen Mountain Center). At Tassajara, I went to a “how-to-meditate” workshop. I was undone, thinking, “Oh, they know how to do it!” And so I began to practice a little on my own. I went out and

bought a zafu and a copy of Suzuki Roshi's book *Zen Mind, Beginner's Mind*.

A year later, I met Jack Kornfield at the Transpersonal Psychology conference, where he was leading a one-day meditation workshop. Two really important things happened at that conference. One was meeting Jack. It felt like the perfect fit, that this was

the practice I'd been looking for. He was just moving to California. I asked him if he would work with me personally because he was doing therapy in those days, and he said yes.

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The other person who was at that conference was Roger Walsh. In the keynote speech for the conference, Roger talked about his concern for all the suffering beings. As he listed all the suffering in the world, he began to weep. I was so moved by that—there was something about his willingness to be that deeply touched in front of a thousand people. I thought, “I don't know what it is he's got, but I want it.” So it was a great joy to find out that he was part of this particular Vipassana scene. And the rest is history. I worked with Jack, and I sat lots and lots of retreats. I did not go to Asia.

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SR: Where were most of the retreats held at that time?

MGO: I sat a lot at Yucca Valley. I would go every year for three weeks. I sat at Santa Sabina Center (in Marin). And some at Insight Meditation Society (IMS), but that came later. Somewhere in there, as my practice deepened, Jack invited me to be part of the teacher training that started in 1989.

SR: Who else was in that teacher training group?

MGO: There was Robert Hall, Gil Fronsdal, John Travis and myself. It was kind of interesting being the only woman in the group, but they were all really lovely to be in training with. John, Gil and I still teach together on a regular basis. We have a retreat every year that we do at Vajrapani Institute that we all cherish. Robert now lives in Mexico.

SR: So you didn't go to Asia. Did you go on a lot of longer retreats here in the U.S.?

MGO: I did several month-long retreats, and I've done a couple of 6-week retreats. There was a year when I did the 3-month retreat (at IMS), a month with Sayadaw U Pandita and a month of Dzogchen practice. I went to Dharamsala (in India) at the end of that year for a meeting with the Dalai Lama, who has become a really important teacher in my life—not a personal teacher but someone who I really look up to. So I had a year that was mostly practice. Then there have been several other longer periods of practice. Right now the great majority of my focus is in the everyday dharma world. And my husband and I teach together about working with relationship as practice.

SR: Are you a therapist, in addition to being a dharma teacher?

MGO: I am one of those (laughs). I received a Master's degree, and I worked for about 25 years as a licensed therapist. I'm no longer licensed, so I would count anything I do in the counseling world now as pastoral care.

SR: When did you move to Santa Cruz?

MGO: I worked as a therapist in Santa Cruz before moving there in 1979. And I love Santa Cruz! That's where I was when I met Jack. When I started the teacher training, there was a sitting group there in somebody's home. I had been part of it for quite awhile, so when I started my training, there was agreement that I would take over the group. We moved into the Santa Cruz Zen Center. This was in 1989, almost 20 years ago. And we started meeting on Thursday nights which is when we still meet. It was a great night if there were more than six people there!

At first, I was really embarrassed about teaching because I was just starting teacher training. I decided that when I gave talks, I would just keep them really short because I felt that I could handle that. I would call them 'dharmaettes' instead of dharma

talks. In 1991, at the time of the first Persian Gulf War, suddenly a lot of people started coming. People felt a need for some kind of support. Our numbers grew exponentially at that point and we began to overflow. We added another sitting during the week in the daytime, and around 1995 we moved into a bigger hall for the Thursday evening sit. And we continued to grow. Somewhere in there I stopped being embarrassed and began to give ordinary dharma talks!

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In 2006, we moved into our own center. We now have Vipassana Santa Cruz and it's out on the west end of town in an old renovated warehouse. We're a 24/7 dharma center with sittings most days of the week and lots of classes. We have an annual retreat that we hold at Land of Medicine Buddha that's taught by our Vipassana Santa Cruz teachers. And now there's sprung up, at my encouragement, a Teacher's Council.

SR: What aspect of teaching the Dharma gives you the most satisfaction and gratitude these days?

MGO: Well, there are a couple of things. Russell and I are teaching relationship as practice, and I have found that to be such a strong, fun and, I think, helpful piece of teaching for people. It's very satisfying to work with couples who are in committed relationship, where we include the sexual aspect of the relationship, the communication aspect, and the everyday aspect, and teach them to work deeply with all of that as part of their spiritual practice. It's fun to teach with my husband because we're very happy together, and it's sweet to share that with couples. We've been doing that now for about five or six years, and we have workshops fairly regularly at our home (in small groups).

Secondly, somebody said to me on the phone yesterday, "Your job description is ending the suffering of sentient beings!" What better job description is there? When we teach the dharma, people hear things that can change their lives and really help them. It's so utterly practical, that you can train the mind, train the heart and find a better way to live. As Sylvia Boorstein likes to say, "There's the third and a half noble truth that if there's not a complete ending of suffering, at least, less."

I see over and over again that there's less suffering. It's pretty inspiring. When I get grumpy and tired, I just look around. I've been part of two meditation centers from the ground up. In addition to Vipassana Santa Cruz, I was on the Spirit Rock Board in the late 1980's as we came onto this land, and I was president of the Board for awhile. It is totally amazing what has happened here! When we had the 20th anniversary event here at Spirit Rock (in September of 2008), I was so touched by hearing the stories again and seeing so many of the people who were involved from the beginning. So I have a lot of gratitude! 🌿